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# Stitching Time: Artisanal Collaboration and Slow Fashion in Post-disaster Haiti

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## *Abstract:*

The promotion of the textile and garment industries as a development strategy following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and a US-backed return to garment assembly lines has prompted an interrogation of some of the local impacts of transnational manufacturing practices in this context. This essay seeks to evaluate alternative fashion practices and social enterprises in Haiti that are currently challenging and *disassembling* the contemporary forms of slavery predominant in offshore low-wage garment manufacturing. These slower “ethical fashion” cooperatives integrate traditional Haitian skills and cultural *konesans* (knowledge) with international design languages and market *savoir-faire* to produce unique handcrafted pieces for the global fashion market. Yet, as this paper argues, these collaborations reveal ongoing neo-colonial inequalities that side-line Haitian agency. Their uneven modes of production and marketing strategies often involve short-term interventions by Western fashion designers that undermine Haitian expertise. This examination of artisan “development” therefore seeks to situate these enterprises in a longer history of sustainability in Haiti. It considers how stitching cloth in response to disaster can retrace the stories of loss and survival of communities and mediate cultural knowledge.

Keywords: Disaster, Ethical fashion, Haiti, Development, Slow fashion

In early October 2016 Hurricane Matthew swept through the southern provinces of Haiti. The grade 4 storm killed over 800 people and decimated homes, crops and livelihoods for thousands of Haiti’s rural population. One month later, severe flooding in the north of the island, intensified by decades of deforestation, led to fatal mudslides in the second city of Cap-Haïtien. International media images that circulated following the devastation caused by Hurricane Matthew and the flooding in Cap-Haïtien depicted streets, railings and bare

structures clothed in garments and mattresses laid out to dry in the sun.<sup>1</sup> Clothing's protective shelter of the body is not impermeable to sudden social and environmental shifts, yet its materiality, and the cultural and personal memories woven therein, might contribute to the restoration of the habitual, the mental and physical environment referred to by Bourdieu as "habitus" (1990, 52). After Haiti defeated French colonisers to gain its independence in 1804, and during the post-slavery era of the nineteenth century, memory was pieced together through the few material possessions of formerly dispossessed peoples.<sup>2</sup> Those who themselves had been considered material "things" during slavery came to have a close relationship with materiality.

Indicative of the climatic and, as I will argue, the enduring social vulnerability of modern Haitian society, the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010 killed over 200 000 people and left more than 1.5 million people homeless. It has been described as "one of the world's most serious humanitarian disasters to date" (Schuller 2012, 13) and prompted a large-scale humanitarian response. The ensuing flow of international donations, a post-disaster phenomenon known as "material convergence" (Holguín-Veras et al. 2013), was unmanageable and "about 80% of clothing donations were useless" (6). The dumping of used goods on the shores of this Caribbean country, without local consultation, reinforces the stigma of Haiti's externally-imposed status on the periphery of the periphery, recently recycled in demeaning and dehumanising terms by the Trump administration.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the traumatic social and ecological ruptures cited above, cloth is instead pieced together by those affected in order to remember; it covers and protects the body, and helps to mediate between the body and its environment, between the self and Other.

This paper examines the role of the garment and textile industry in narratives of post-disaster economic "development" in Haiti. Following the 2010 earthquake there has been a renewed focus on two main areas of the garment sector: the expansion of export processing zones (EPZ) in the north of the country, and the promotion of smaller artisanal enterprises. In

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, photographs taken by the AFP news agency for *L'express*, Mourad Wahba, "Haiti en deuil", October 9, 2016. [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/1/monde/haiti-en-deuil-veut-organiser-l-aide-humanitaire-pour-eviter-le-fiasco-de-2010\\_1839047.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/1/monde/haiti-en-deuil-veut-organiser-l-aide-humanitaire-pour-eviter-le-fiasco-de-2010_1839047.html). Joshua Partlow, "There is nothing left to live on", *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/crisis-deepens-in-haiti-in-aftermath-of-hurricane/2016/10/07/fdda488e-8c0e-11e6-8cdc-4fbb1973b506\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5e8c0eee83b9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/crisis-deepens-in-haiti-in-aftermath-of-hurricane/2016/10/07/fdda488e-8c0e-11e6-8cdc-4fbb1973b506_story.html?utm_term=.5e8c0eee83b9).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the marketing system that enabled slaves to enhance their social conditions and forge identity using dress as "individual signature", see Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot's essay "The Otherwise Modern" (2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Haitian author Edwidge Danticat's response to Donald Trump's racist labelling of Haiti as a "shithole country", *Miami Herald*, "Haitians are used to insults. Friday, we mourned. Today, we fight", January 12, 2018. <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article194492199.html>.

its investigation of the latter, this essay questions the reliability and sustainability of “collaboration” between local Haitian artisans, and Western design entrepreneurs in the aftermath of the earthquake. Focusing on local shoe production, both before and after the earthquake, it combines close reading of promotional materials used in sustainable fashion partnerships - JL Fine Shoes SA, TOMS Shoes - with extracts from a series of ongoing qualitative semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs - Artisan Business Network, Deux Mains - to question the extent to which these design interventions benefit domestic industry, and in the words of Bill Clinton, “build back better”.<sup>4</sup> The final part will consider alternative creative processes in response to the earthquake and their potential to challenge the cloth plant(ations) and fast fashion assembly lines being promoted as post-disaster development in Haiti.

In a piece for the *Boston Review*, novelist Junot Díaz wrote about the 2010 earthquake in Haiti as an apocalypse, highlighting the Greek origins of the word (*apocalypsis*) meaning to reveal or unveil. The quake not only exposed deep historical, social fractures and global inequalities, it “put Haiti on the map” making the country visible (seemingly for the first time) to outside eyes.<sup>5</sup> The aftershocks of the earthquake, the collective trauma and destruction, provided what Naomi Klein (2007) has conceived, in her writing on Hurricane Katrina, as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, onto which a nexus of international donors (NGOs, US policymakers, the Inter-American Development Bank [IDB]) could impose their plans to expand low-wage textile and garment production sites under the pretext of “development” (Shamsie 2014, 82). If, for Paul Gilroy, plantation slavery was “capitalism with its clothes off” (1993, 15), the economic success of which was based on commodity production for export, Haiti continues to be viewed an *atelier* of external capitalist development today. Formerly France’s most profitable colony (then known as Saint-Domingue), in the early nineteenth century, an independent Haitian state was forged out of resistance to the deep inequalities and vertical hierarchies of the transatlantic slave trade. Haiti’s political and economic development in the post-emancipation era was hindered most significantly by the United States who openly ostracized the black republic whilst continuing to profit from an

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.clintonfoundation.org/haiti-building-back-better>.

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Kaussen writes how after the quake humanitarian organizations and Google rushed to create maps of Port-au-Prince. The variety of visual (online) materials which became available were, as Kaussen argues, “packaged as an effort to encourage users to make the choice of ‘getting involved’ ‘helping Haiti’ and participating in the relief effort” (2015, 35).

uneven trade in US goods.<sup>6</sup> As Haitian scholar, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, asserts, “Haiti’s very proximity to the United States made the latter an ideal source of foodstuffs and textiles for its citizens” (1990, 53). Despite competition from Europe, the arrival of Levantine immigrant traders in the late nineteenth century helped to lever “the U.S. offensive against indigenous Haitian commerce and craftsmanship” (56). Meanwhile a postcolonial Haitian elite continued to hold France in high regard, the latter buying the majority of Haitian exports. As Trouillot argued, by the turn of the century Haiti fitted poorly into the world system, “torn by its dual and fragmented dependence on France and the United States” (56), and became the first neocolony of these two industrializing powers (57). A nineteen-year military occupation by the US beginning in 1915 sustained this neo-colonial experimentation in its promotion of export-oriented plantations. The centralization of power under occupation, increase in foreign imports and appropriation of land led to the displacement of rural farming communities to the precarious hillsides of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and what Martin Munro has called “the long disaster of deforestation” (2015, 513). By the twenty-first century, these social and economic constraints had produced conditions that could precipitate a large-scale disaster. As Jonathan Katz has noted, “After two centuries of struggle, Haiti had a third of its population packed into an overcrowded city on a fault line” (2013, 52). The not so natural disaster of 2010 - which I am arguing cannot be read in isolation from its colonial and imperial socio-political antecedents - has attracted neocolonialist capital adventurers who see in Haiti a global factory “open for business”.<sup>7</sup>

## Haiti’s Garment Assembly Industry

Since Haitian independence in 1804, the *moun andeyo* - a term still heard to classify rural farming communities, literally meaning “people outside” - have been marginalized and excluded by the Haitian state. Their peripheral position can be attributed to their ongoing subjugation to damaging neo-colonial and imperial interventions. These include repeated occupations and neoliberal trade policies, promoted by external actors and a minority Haitian elite that often bypass the state, leaving it fractured and disconnected from civil society

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<sup>6</sup> Despite gaining independence in 1804, the US only recognised Haiti in 1862. While France acknowledged its existence earlier in 1825, this was conditional, and Haiti was forced to pay crippling financial reparations to compensate their former Masters’ “loss” (Trouillot 1990, 50-53).

<sup>7</sup> This is the slogan used by then President Michel Martelly to promote Haiti as a “destination” for foreign investors following the earthquake. For further considerations of the earthquake as a man-made disaster, see Bellegarde-Smith (2011) and Munro (2014).

(Trouillot 1990; Shamsie 2014).<sup>8</sup> The failure of neoliberal free market capitalism in the past, resulting in increased poverty and class division, has shown that one of its key strategies, the garment assembly industry, is not a viable means of economic growth for the country and remains in service to foreign capitalists.<sup>9</sup> Despite past errors, the global assembly line model, whereby each stage of production is spread across global borders and tariffs are kept low, is being rebranded as a “new idea.” Women who once sewed the land to grow food are now forced to sew low grade cotton t-shirts.

In the late 1960s the president Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier outlined a vision for Haiti of increased economic dependence on the US. During a 1969 visit from the US vice president Nelson Rockefeller, Papa Doc insisted: “Haiti could be a great reservoir of manual labor for Americans establishing re-export industries because it is closer, more reliable and easier [sic] than Hong Kong” (Trouillot 1990, 200). The introduction of garment assembly industry during this period would continue to increase the economic and spatial abyss between rural Haiti and the overcrowded capital, which came to be known as the “Republic of Port-au-Prince” (Trouillot 1990, 140; 200-210).

Lessons learnt from previous failed attempts to launch the export assembly industry in the region (Trouillot 1990, 201) were incorporated into a series of legislations (starting with Reagan’s Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act [CBERA] introduced in February 1982) that ensured closer collaboration between the Haitian state, and local and foreign capitalists. Under the dictatorship of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in the 1980s, this strategy of export-based economic development through offshore garment assembly, first envisioned by his father, was enforced by the same combination of lenders omnipresent in the region today: the US Agency for International Development (AID), the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. This new legislation extended access for duty-free imports to the US, subject to certain restrictions. The fabric and thread used to assemble these goods abroad had to be made and cut in the US and the garments returned to the US for finishing. The manufacturing from start to finish was engineered by US companies who subcontract standardised assembly work to off-shore factories.

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<sup>8</sup> Until 1995 the Haitian legal system distinguished between people living in the cities and peasants outside the cities whose birth certificates were marked with the status of “paysan”. Rural (excluded) families are still known as *moun andeyo* (people outside), while those from the capital Port-au-Prince are called *moun anndan* (people inside). See N’Zengou-Tayo (1998, 119) and Bell (2013, 67).

<sup>9</sup> See *Haiti Grass Roots Watch* “Martelly Government Betting on Sweatshops” December 7-13, 2011. <http://www.haiti-liberte.com/archives/volume5-21/Martelly%20government.asp>.



Political instability, US economic sanctions (1991-1994) and a UN trade embargo (1994) damaged the clothing industry in Haiti throughout the 1990s, as did increased competition from Central America, particularly in Honduras and Nicaragua. In an attempt to revive the sector, the US introduced a series of trade laws from 2006 onwards: firstly, the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act (HOPE), which was revised in 2008 to allow the Dominican Republic to benefit from duty-free conditions if the garments were partially produced in Haiti. Yarn could be spun and cloth woven in the Dominican Republic, sewn in Haiti, dyed and finished in the DR and then shipped out of Dominican ports to North America. The 2010 Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) Act has extended the HOPE II trade preferences to 2020 in an attempt to make Haiti an appealing choice for manufacturers supplying the US and Canadian market.

With renewed force since the 2010 earthquake, capital investors, with the collaboration of the Haitian state, are once again seeking to turn farmers into factory workers. Due to low labour costs (compared to Central America), its geographical proximity to the US, low tariffs and the deregulation of labour codes, Haiti continues to be an attractive production site for free trade assembly zones. In 2012 the Caracol Industrial Park was built on fertile farming soil, in an area largely unaffected by the earthquake some 300km north of Port-au-Prince. *New York Times* correspondent, Deborah Sontag, called it “earthquake relief where Haiti wasn’t broken” (2012). The park is situated adjacent to Caracol Bay, an area which, prior to the quake, was to become the first marine conservation area in Haiti due to its extensive mangroves and coral reef.<sup>10</sup> According to reports by ActionAid and Gender Action 366 farmers and their families in the agricultural area of Caracol have been displaced to make way for the park and so far, inadequately compensated (Lauterbach 2013: 22). An IDB report, on the other hand, described it as the catalyst at the centre of their development efforts and “one of the most important initiatives to boost investment and employment in Haiti.”<sup>11</sup> One of the arguments espoused by the park’s advocates is that it will address the economic polarization of Haiti, by creating jobs outside the capital. Yet, Port-au-Prince residents, who would most benefit from job opportunities after the earthquake, are unable to access the remote industrial park, and have been reluctant to reverse their family’s rural to urban migration, in exchange for poor working conditions, low wages and housing in the USAID-

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the location of Caracol Industrial Park, see the Haiti Support Group Briefing, December 2013 and the dossier compiled by Haiti Grassroots Watch, “Haiti: Open for Business”, November 29, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> See “Caracol in Haiti: Development Beyond an Industrial Park”, <http://www.iadb.org/en/mapamericas/haiti-old/caracol-in-haiti-development-beyond-an-industrial-park,7811.html>.

funded village, *La Difference*.<sup>12</sup> This isolated zone risks producing the next Cité Soleil, the overcrowded housing slum which has swollen around the capital's main export processing zone, the SONAPI industrial park, built in 1981 under the Duvalier regime, or the substandard worker housing in Ouanaminthe, that provides the Haitian labour for the Dominican-owned Codevi plant.

## The Promotion of Ethical Fashion as Development

Post-earthquake development in Haiti has seen a proliferation of foreign-led social entrepreneurship programmes, from fashion startups producing school shoes to soap recycling initiatives hoping to combat cholera.<sup>13</sup> In developing countries, as Diallo and Daniel (2016) argue, these are innovative processes to promote economic growth and empower marginalized sections of the population. Fashion as development models aim to connect local artisanal production with the international fashion marketplace through a positive narrative of “ethical fashion”.<sup>14</sup> I am using the term “ethical fashion” in this essay to describe processes of fashion production (and consumption) that privilege sustainability not only as a solution to environmentally detrimental manufacturing processes, but also from a people-centred perspective, as an alternative to the low wages and substandard working conditions of the dominant mass-production fast fashion model. Ethical fashion collaborations as strategies of development seek to ensure that the local artisan benefits from access to fashion's value chain while the international designer conveys a message of ethical consciousness, which can subsequently enhance their brand identity and increase sales. The commercialisation of slow craft traditions in response to a crisis or disaster is nothing new and is not unique to Haiti. ‘Trade not aid’ partnerships, with NGOs seizing on opportunities within cultural industries, were promoted following the 2001 earthquake in the Kutch region of India (Littrell and Frater 2013, 375). However, in Haiti, now nicknamed the “Republic of NGOs”, these fashion for development initiatives are fast becoming a way of life and many seem to function through the continued marginalization of local artisans.

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<sup>12</sup> This assertion is based on interviews with members of the Sendika Ouvriye Tekstil ak Abiman (SOTA) in Port-au-Prince (Nov 2016) and the Sendika Ouvriye Vanyan S&H Global (SOVASHG) in Limonade (Aug 2017), textile worker unions affiliated with the Batay Ouvriye platform in Haiti.

<sup>13</sup> Examples include: Deux Mains, Women of Milot Entrepreneurial Network, Anacaona soap.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the work of the UN-sponsored Ethical Fashion Initiative that links micro-entrepreneurs in Haiti with Western fashion designers and brands.



Supported by the Clinton Global Initiative, fashion designer Donna Karan founded the seemingly well-meaning Haiti Artisan Project in 2010. This collaboration with local skilled craftspeople to produce jewellery, accessories and homeware, relies on Karan's celebrity status to intervene and "help Haiti" (Noel 2016, 460). Another, US designer and Project Runway reality TV star Nicholas D'Aurizio, has spent two years (2015-17) training and teaching pattern-cutting to Haitian workers at the newly opened factory of Haitian shoe manufacturers JL Fine Shoes.<sup>15</sup> D'Aurizio performs giving (back) through social media, tweeting photos of his expert hands cutting out technical pattern pieces, #fashionhelpinghaiti #madeinhaiti #madeforhaiti #adventure #escape. In D'Aurizio's mission to "help Haiti", I want to highlight first the symbolism of the couture pattern piece as a blueprint for Western fashion practices. Instead of nurturing local design thinking, designers in transit or passing through, often impose remote design processes without consulting local specialist expertise.<sup>16</sup> The label of "artisan" ascribed by Karan, and other international designers, suggests knowledge exchange and the Latin etymology of the word is tied to instruction in the arts (artire, artitus) yet the flow of "training" is generally into, not out of, Haiti. According to local media reports, JL Fine Shoes are currently targeting a national market, which means that designer interventions in techniques of cutting and sewing have the potential to control the appearance of local styles. This shift means that existing local skills in patterncutting, construction, and design languages (colours, motifs, materials) are bypassed.

An interview with Haitian tailor, Jean Jonas Labaze, who trained at a couture school in Léogâne, south of Port-au-Prince, revealed three technical methods that have been commonly used in dressmaking in Haiti: the first is the traditional Creole system *twal sou twal* (toile on toile), which has been used to reproduce 1950s Creole styles; the second is *koud avek mezir* (sewing with body measurements but no pattern); the third is *model-patwon* (use of patterns). According to Labaze, when he was young in the early 1980s all children were taught how to sew at school. The girls learnt embroidery while the boys learnt how to sew shirts, trousers or *cordonnerie* (shoemaking). At one time, as Haitian historian Georges Corvington records in his history of Port-au-Prince, shoemaking was a viable profession in

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<sup>15</sup> D'Aurizio, who participated in Haitian Fashion Week in 2015, has recently launched his own label in Haiti, Liv by Nico Lena. I am grateful to D'Aurizio for agreeing to meet me and answering my questions via email.

<sup>16</sup> Embedding cultural education for design students has become necessary as designers increasingly travel to developing countries to work. All too aware of the increase in "voluntourism" since the earthquake, Cécile Accilien, associate professor of African and African-American studies at the University of Kansas, has been teaching integral classes on Haitian culture to Architecture students who in 2017 travelled to Haiti to build a community centre in the southern commune of Torbeck, an area badly affected by Hurricane Matthew in 2016.

Haiti (1984, 241). Corvington notes that during the late period of the US occupation (1922-1934), “A more noticeable Haitian presence can be observed in the shoemaking industry, traditionally the stronghold of Italian traders” (1987, 225).<sup>17</sup> As the industry grew, cobblers, working for an atelier or for oneself, alongside more modern shoe manufacturers, went on to sheath the feet of many generations of Haitians. The managing director of JL Fine Shoes, Jean Lucien Ligondé, laments the demise of Haitian-made Bata shoes (Alphonse 2016). As Labaze confirmed, the Bata factory produced good-quality school shoes, and competed with shoe imports from the Caribbean region, particularly Curaçao and Panama, before the market was flooded with second-hand shoes sent from the US.

*[Insert Figure 1: Tailor Jean Jonas Labaze. Photo by Leah Gordon from her ‘Tailors of Port-au-Prince’ series, 2012]*

Since 1961, when it was first imported under President John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress Latin American assistance programme (USAID), second-hand clothing, or *pèpè* as it is known in Haiti, has been shipped in tightly-packed bundles from the US. On reaching Haitian ports, it is then transported and traded throughout the country as well as across the border into the Dominican Republic (Shell 2006, 154).<sup>18</sup> As an echo of the clothing castoffs once passed down from Master to slave in eighteenth-century colonial Saint-Domingue, *pèpè* is a symbolic reminder that Haitian bodies are still dominated by neo-colonial powers. However, innovations in *pèpè* recycling and restyling by Haitian seamstresses and tailors, along with women’s economic strategies that weave informal business networks through trade in *pèpè*, are evidence of what bell hooks calls ‘creative responses to one’s plight’ (2007, 318). A result of foreign assistance, this flexible activity that evades state control enables women to forge alternative economic and social networks and refashion their own identities.

Haitian brand JL Fine Shoes aims to compete with imported shoes as well as *soulye pèpè*, the secondhand shoe trade. During the 2016 back to school season, the company offered a 20% discount on school shoes and Ligondé is hoping to work in partnership with the minister of education to subsidise school shoes in the future. The creation of employment and a national production challenges an overreliance on donated shoes which have been used

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<sup>17</sup> “Une présence haïtienne plus remarquable se constate dans le secteur de la cordonnerie, fief traditionnel des commerçants italiens.”

<sup>18</sup> ‘Kennedy’ is another name for second-hand clothing in Haiti. See Hanna Rose Shell and Vanessa Bertozzi’s documentary on the subject in Haiti, *Secondhand (Pepe)*, 2007, Fabrik Films. The impact of the second-hand clothing trade on African clothing industries and the economic bearing on local production has been well documented (Brooks 2015; Hansen 2000). For research into the trade in *pèpè* across the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic see Shoaff (2015) and Mackintosh (2011).

as a form of social control. As one commentator exclaimed in response to an article in the Haitian newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* on August 8, 2016 introducing the enterprise:

*Viv soulye peyi!*

*Aba soulye pèpè!*

Long live national shoes!

Down with donated shoes!

The location of JL Fine Shoes' only shop in the upper-class suburb of Pétionville suggests however that the business initiative is realistically targeting a minority market: Haiti's elite class. The company remains reliant on training from US designers like D'Aurizio. These short-term interventions of help are based on enduring colonial and imperial inequalities and dependence, whereby the colonial plantation overseer is replaced by the *travayè developman*/development worker who controls over the reproductive labour of the economic slave. Unlike the designer-tourist, for the Haitian worker-artisan there is no #escape, only displacement.

*[Insert Figure 2: Bundles of pèpè secondhand clothing from the US being transported to a depot in Cap-Haïtien]*

### *This is TOMS in Haiti*

One alternative “development” model proposed in a quake-damaged Haitian economy was that of the US shoe company TOMS. Blake Mycoskie, the founder of the TOMS: Shoes for Tomorrow brand writes in his memoir that it was during a trip to Argentina, seeing shoeless children in a village outside Buenos Aires that he came up with the idea for a for-profit social enterprise.

I knew somewhere in the back of the mind that poor children around the world often went barefoot, but now, for the first time, I saw the real effects of being shoeless: the blisters, the sores, the infections – all the result of the children not being able to protect their young feet from the ground (2012, 5).

Mycoskie translated the basic design of the Argentinian alpargata or espadrille which has undergone various design evolutions, conveying a wide range of social meanings since its fourteenth-century Catalan origins: from the (durable) uniform alpargatas worn by Argentine labourers to the novelty printed versions that have become quintessential footwear on university campuses across the world (Brooks 2015, 208).

The TOMS model is founded on giving and defines itself not as a business but a movement. Founder, Blake Mycoskie, describing his role as ‘chief shoe giver’ on the front cover of his memoir, claims: “for every pair I sell, I’m going to give one pair to a kid in need”. This trademark one-for-one model fuels a powerful narrative of giving and fixes the recipient into a relationship of dependency. The brand’s “followers” are a new generation of highly mobile millennials who purchase fashion not only to indicate status but also to signal affiliation to a particular social or political issue. In the early days of the company, thousands of unpaid volunteers signed up to take part in ‘shoe drop’ interventions, which involved flying the devotees to destinations in the Global South in order to distribute donated shoes in person (rather than employing local people). This form of “slum tourism”, a trend identified by Frenzel et al. (2012) as “the touristic valorization of poverty-stricken urban areas” (1), is comparable to the mobility of international designers, as mentioned earlier in this article, who, like the consumer goods themselves, circulate with ease, whilst Haitian designers remain static and powerless.

The performance of giving, a hypervisible participation in post-disaster relief, involves the disposal of unsolicited goods on the doorstep of those deemed in need, who are rarely consulted in the process (Talpalaru 2014, 169). The distribution of what Bourdieu calls “forced gifts” turns the recipients into indebted subjects and “the receiver is ‘obliged’, expected to show his gratitude to his benefactor or at least to show regard for him” (1990, 106). Gift-giving can thus be understood in terms of its ostensible purpose: to display power. By failing to recognize the recipient of the “gift” or how it is received, the TOMS ethical brand narrative further maintains inequalities between the helper and the helpless, echoing colonial binaries between the white ‘saviour’ and the black ‘primitive’ in need of saving. As outlined above, Western powers have been persistently attempting to reassert Haiti’s economic dependence since its inception as an independent post-slavery state in the nineteenth century. Haiti’s structural dependence on handouts and hand-me-downs from the US was formally recognised in the 1960s when, as mentioned previously, Kennedy started shipping second-hand goods to Haiti as part of its international aid programme. The

asymmetrical distribution of power inherent to this paternalistic system has its origins in the fabric and clothing castoffs handed down by the Master during the colonial period. Cloth served as a currency for selling human lives into slavery and continued to serve as a material reminder that Haitian bodies were not legally their own.

Colin Dayan reminds us that Haitians themselves have often been thought of as disposable, when she flags a racism “that depends for its power on the conceptual force of the ‘superfluous’, what can be rendered as ‘remnants’ or ‘waste’ or ‘dirt’... to be ‘disposable’ is not having the capacity to be dispossessed, to be nothing more than dispensable stuff” (2015, 93). Racial slavery necessitated upcycling of the self. In the shadows of this violent history, as Sibylle Fischer puts it, “universal humanity turns into an act of salvaging” (2015). The tabula rasa of colonial discourse reproduces itself through development narratives that emphasize the need to transform Haiti and start anew. However, as Klein attests, “most people who survive a devastating disaster want the opposite of a clean slate: they want to salvage whatever they can and begin repairing what was destroyed, they want to reaffirm their relatedness to the places that formed them” (2007, 8). The forced displacement of whole camps of people left homeless following the 2010 earthquake has made it even harder to salvage and mend local communities. Many small-scale traders have been forced to change profession and seek employment in alternative sectors. In-kind donations are not helpful in this respect as they can contribute to the displacement of local businesses.

The problem of a lack of access to shoes was not a prevalent developmental concern following the earthquake in Haiti. Many of the TOMS donator shoes migrate and, like the second-hand clothing imports, end up for sale in Dominican markets across the internal borders of the island. The effects of in-kind donations on local economic growth and existing textile production have been widely criticised (Brooks 2015; Talpalaru 2014; Wydick et al. 2014; Lamrad and Hanlon 2015) and one of the company’s responses to this has been to open factories in order to produce shoes in the countries where they are being donated, which includes China, Argentina, Kenya, Ethiopia and Haiti.

The earthquake offered the perfect opportunity; the TOMS narrative of giving subsequently shifted to emphasize a language of “co-production”. In the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, the itinerant performer and UN Special Envoy to Haiti, Bill Clinton visited the country and asked what he could do to help. The answer he received was “jobs”. Prior to the earthquake, Clinton had been encouraging US, Dominican and Asian

garment manufacturers, backed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), to invest in low-wage textile and garment production sites in the north of Haiti (Shamsie 2014, 84). Following the earthquake, international donors put pressure on South Korean textile manufacturers SAE-A, and later, in the case of TOMS, Hong Kong-based LXJ Golden Pacific, to open factories in Haiti. According to the TOMS website, the company, whose factory opened in Port-au-Prince in 2014, now “works closely” with Haiti’s government, “collaborates” with artisans who “embody the word perseverance” and “laugh and joke” as they learn how to manufacture shoes in a city where “a shoe industry did not exist prior”.<sup>19</sup>

As part of the post-earthquake relief effort the Clinton Global Initiative asked Mycoskie to help Haiti in 2010 by donating hundreds and thousands of pairs of TOMS. At the 2013 CGI meeting, attended by Haiti’s then Prime Minister, Laurent Lamothe, Mycoskie announced that the company would invest \$10 million to build a TOMS shoe factory in Port-au-Prince, aiming to start production in 2014. The aim was to produce the TOMS giving shoes at this facility which would directly benefit the surrounding communities, promote a sustainable Haitian shoe industry and develop local partnerships. At this point, TOMS had already been collaborating with over thirty artisans in Haiti using the Argentinian alpargata espadrille, in the words of Mycoskie, as a “blank canvas”, commissioning colourful fabric designs that made up a limited edition series of shoes under the Haiti Artists Collective name attributed by the company.

The website proudly focuses on the artisan and their “individual” hand-painted designs. In their search for authenticity and distinction, consumers purchase shoes adorned in gaudily painted Haitian tap-tap (buses), Vodou insignia and tropicalized postcard landscapes. In the encounter between artisan and entrepreneur, the artisan crafts an artifice of Haitian culture in the entrepreneur’s vision. Offshore manufacturing has meant that as these motifs and objects are commodified they travel across borders with ease. The translatability of the shoes, how the objects are read by those who come into contact with them, determine their value. As consumers collect the shoes, they collect (homogenizing postcards of) the dependent Other in the belief that they are simultaneously alleviating poverty. The otherness that the shoe comes to embody, taking on a fetish quality, becomes itself a fetish for Haiti as a marketable commodity. For the consumer, the magic of “possession” of this commodity lies

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<sup>19</sup> See: [www.toms.com/haiti-artist-collective](http://www.toms.com/haiti-artist-collective); <http://www.toms.com/stories/latest-news/this-is-haiti>; [www.toms.co.uk/stories/giving/building-a-sustainable-shoe-industry-in-haiti](http://www.toms.co.uk/stories/giving/building-a-sustainable-shoe-industry-in-haiti).



in what Jennifer Craik emphasizes in her study of fashion and tourism as “the imaginary allure of qualities that can transcend the mundane experiences of the everyday” (2013, 356).

The location of production is foregrounded in the website and advertising campaign. A ‘This is Haiti’ promotional video depicts pooristic images of the painted facades of the Jalousie slum, juxtaposed with gingerbread houses and shots of street galleries lined with garish paintings of the exoticised constructions that adorn the shoes themselves.<sup>20</sup> The framing of North-Atlantic millennials clad in immaculate TOMS casually posing against a backdrop of earthquake rubble and dust commodifies disaster, epitomizing a trend in fashion tourism for “experiences” (Craik 2013, 363). The angle from which the space is filmed only works to reinforce an us and them distance, recalling Saïd’s notion of “imaginative geography” where spatial distance corresponds to ethnic or social distance (1979: 49).<sup>21</sup>

[Figure 3: TOMS ‘This is Haiti’ window promotion, UK. Photo: Charlotte Hammond]

The company’s website and blog invite the consumer to meet the collective, providing names and profile photos of the makers at work. The diffusion of images of the TOMS factory workers on the internet does not however equate to their increased actual mobility and the marginal, static status of the artisan is exacerbated by their inability to travel and sell their goods themselves. Promotion of the slow fashion of the handworked stitch or handpainted motif can moreover be seen to maintain a tradition/modernity, margin/centre binary fixing the artisans in a servile position as they reproduce traditional designs reworked for overseas consumption. Without a say in design, training or how products are marketed, and constrained by mobility, artisans are left to play a peripheral role in these projects.

## Artisanal Partnerships

The IDB-sponsored Artisan Business Network (ABN) is attempting to tackle the problem of mobility in particular. The initiative, established in 2011, aims to improve the quality of

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<sup>20</sup> Available to view on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFeuSIKjjHQ>.

<sup>21</sup> In 2014 the campaign travelled to a department store window on the UK high street. In this version, TOMS shoes were framed against a backdrop of blown-up images of Haitian schoolchildren and surfers accompanied by the slogan “This is Haiti”. Ironically school uniforms remain some of the only garments that independent Haitian tailors are still regularly asked to sew and are a reminder of how existing textile manufacturing has been displaced with donations from the US or garment assembly development models that largely serve north American economic interests. See Leah Gordon’s photography series *The Tailors of Port-au-Prince*: <http://leahgordon.co.uk/index.php/project/tailors-of-port-au-prince/>.

artisanal work in Haiti and act as an intermediary between entrepreneurs and international markets. Its director, Nathalie Tancrede, returned to the country where she was born after the earthquake to act as a linguistic translator in the relief efforts. The organisation she heads could itself be considered a translation agency, mediating between (often rural) artisan groups and global markets. Part of their work is to improve the price, quality and relevance of the products, which may include toning down the “Caribbean colours” that, according to Tancrede, will not sell in the US. By intervening to make the handcrafts “less Caribbean”, by manipulating colours and styles, the agents ensure more industrial results, that is, more uniform, faster and cheaper products. The ABN also takes care of marketing. They film the artisans to produce promotional videos and invite fashion bloggers from abroad who “spend a few days visiting the artisan workshops, getting to know them and writing articles about them.”<sup>22</sup> International bloggers, whose virtual omnipresence has transformed them into powerful arbiters of global trends, are privileged over Haitian bloggers, or those with the potential to become the next generation of digital artisans. As Tancrede herself points out:

A lot of folks are now in Port-au-Prince. They don't want to stay in the rural areas. There used to be a large group of basket-weavers in the mountains and now it's very difficult to find them because they're getting old. Their kids don't want to do this type of work. They don't want to do agriculture they don't want to do artisan work. Everybody wants to work in an office or in Port-au-Prince or they want to travel.

This narrative suggests that young Haitians seeking jobs are not choosing the same artisanal routes of previous generations, yet, equally are not being given the opportunities to represent their own culture on their own terms. The generational move away from “artisan work” furthermore calls into question the longevity and reliability of feel-good craft partnerships in Haiti. The ABN has only secured funding till 2018 and is currently not selling enough to ensure sustainability thereafter.

Some smaller collaborations striving to offer alternatives to the mass-production assembly line in post-quake Haiti, including a living wage and improved working conditions, have struggled to survive, further questioning the ability of this strategy to bring about foundational long-term improvements to the economy. US-based designer activist, Frau Fiber and fashion startup Local Buttons, have both tapped into innovative recycling traditions in Haiti, where nothing is thrown out or wasted, to engage in what can be termed “disassembly

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Nathalie Tancrede, November 14, 2016, Port-au-Prince.

work”.<sup>23</sup> These small-scale projects attempted to draw attention to the impact of the dumping of secondhand clothing donations (or *pèpè*) from the US in Haiti through collaborations with Haitian tailors and seamstresses in Port-au-Prince to rework the used clothing into new designs to sell back to a North American market.

“Made in Haiti” was an artwork originally created by Frau Fiber (aka Carole Frances Lung) for the 2009 Ghetto Biennale, held in the Grand Rue area of Port-au-Prince. Frau Fiber used exhibitions to create pop up shops to sell the distinct garments, designed and produced in collaboration with local tailor Jean Jonas Labaze. As a critique of the fast fashion supply chain with its low wages, unsafe working conditions and surplus of textile waste, “it made good art but a failed business”.<sup>24</sup> The ineffective long-term sustainability of Local Buttons, the fashion startup founded by entrepreneurial duo Anne Pringle and Consuelo McAlister in 2010 was largely due to the deconstruction process of piecing together fragments of *pèpè*, whereby workers once trained in assembly work were now hired to disassemble garments; availability of equipment (they had to import irons/steamers/pattern paper); inability to fill middle-skilled management positions; and the way in which they sold the pieces online to North American consumers. Each unique piece had to be photographed and a full run of colours and sizes was not available (Lewis and Pringle, 123).

Another post-quake fashion startup, Deux Mains, founded by Julie Colombino in 2010, recycles rubber tyres to produce sandals aimed at a North American market. The company started as a collaboration between Colombino and a group of four women whose homes had been destroyed during the earthquake. One of these women who now works in a supervisory role explained to me that before the quake she was a trader in cosmetics and perfume.<sup>25</sup> Describing shoemaking practices in Haiti, she explained that local artisans make sandals but not using recycled rubber.<sup>26</sup> When I asked the ABN about whether there is a history of recycling in Haiti I was told that this was a recent phenomenon due to the influence of international design thinking and *savoir-faire*. This narrative effectively erases local design *konesans* (knowledge), including a long history of recycling in Haiti, or what is known

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<sup>23</sup> L’Institut National pour le Développement et la Promotion de la Couture (INDEPCO), a Haitian cooperative of workers in the garment sector, supported by the USAID and Clinton-Bush Haiti Fund, provided a Haitian workforce for Local Buttons, as well as premises to start production (Lewis and Pringle 2015, 116).

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Carole Frances Lung who answered my questions via email correspondence (January 11, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> For more on the importance of Haiti’s women traders, known as *Madan Sara*, to the Haitian economy see Mintz (2010, 122) and Trouillot (1990, 82).

<sup>26</sup> “Yo fè sandal men yo pa kapab fè ak kaoutchou; yo fè valiz men pa ak kaoutchou.” Interview, November 9, 2016. Names have been omitted to preserve anonymity.

locally as *rekuperasyon* (Fischer 2015).<sup>27</sup> A distinctly creole aesthetic of working with what comes to hand, piecing together scraps to form what Sally Price has called “aesthetic wholes” (2015), is characteristic of a shared African diasporic experience, marked by the ruptures and dispersions of the Middle Passage and plantation slavery.

[Figure 4: ‘Deux Mains’ shoe production, Port-au-Prince. Photo: Charlotte Hammond]

## Slow Stitching and Storytelling

Somewhere within the fast, disposable labour of a capitalist garment sector and the contradictions of ethical design partnerships, oppositional and innovative modes of textile creation do emerge. This final section will consider an enacted slowness, with ties to memory and textile heritage in the region. Development narratives often posit Haiti, and the Caribbean region, as “lagging behind” (Sheller 2016, 141), and Haitians as unable to “stand up for themselves”.<sup>28</sup> There is, however, strategic potential in the act of performative “lagging” or foot-dragging as a slow *détour* (Glissant 1997, 48), a necessary resistance to the overwhelming speed that dominates the fashion system.

Like the African diasporic tradition of quilting, needlework and embroidery, which involve the action of hand sewing or working with one’s hands give time to reflect, recoup and self-mend. bell hooks argues that artistic expression has been a way for displaced African people “to maintain connections with the past.” She writes how her mother passed down the skill of sewing to her, and conceptualises African American “quiltmaking as a way of stillness, as a process by which a ‘woman learns patience’. These rural black women”, she continues “knew nothing of female passivity. Constantly active, they were workers – black women with sharp tongues, strong arms, heavy hands, with too much labour and too little time. There was always work to be done; space had to be made for stillness, for quiet and concentration. Quilting was a way to ‘calm the heart’ and ‘ease the mind’” (2007, 328). For

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the work of the Sculptors of the Grand Rue who use recycled tyre rubber in their work.

<sup>28</sup> This latter image is highlighted in an interview with Daniel Jean-Louis of Partners Worldwide for Michael Matheson Miller’s 2015 documentary *Poverty Inc.* See, also, the TOMS “This is Haiti” narrative that foregrounds the tired epithet of Haiti as “the least developed country in the Western Hemisphere”; David Brooks piece for the *New York Times* following the earthquake that describes Haitian culture as “progress-resistant” (January 14, 2010); and interrogations of these singular narratives of Haiti by Ulysse (2015) and Bell (2013, 80).

Haitian women, who since the times of slavery have been portrayed as labouring bodies at work, this meditative bodily act of sewing cloth is both means of socialisation and self-care.

This sewing circle activity, where women have learnt to engage in a reputable craft and perform docility, is furthermore a legacy of the domestic circles of plantation slavery where the slaveholders' garments were sewn and mended and occasionally unpicked and damaged (Weaver 2012, 44-59). Prior to factory work, plantation cloth work and its division of labour developed into the sweating system, whereby work is let out to subcontractors who complete it in small shops or their homes (Howard 2007, 33). Novelist Edwidge Danticat writes in the foreword to Beverly Bell's *Fault Lines*:

When I was a girl in Haiti, I lived next door to three sisters who did piecework for an American evening gown company. In order to pay for their living expenses and another sister's education, the sisters strung together sequins and beads that would then be attached to gowns that, once completed, they carried to a factory near the airport.

Every now and then, Lina, Dieula, and Anisi Espérance would invite a few neighbourhood girls to help them with their work. For this we would get a cent or two, a miniscule percentage of the very low wage they were being paid. Helping, however, would mean sitting at their feet, beneath the winnowing trays on which they had piled their materials and catching, along with sprinkles of their conversations, any beads or sequins that would accidentally fall or be blown away. (2013, xi)

As well as the labour of garment assembly, Danticat's writing here reminds us of the physical and intimate qualities of cloth that allow it to embody memory and sensation. As Jones and Stallybrass have argued, "Clothing is a worn world . . . memory materialized" (2000, 3-5).

Haitian mixed media and performance artist Barbara Prézeau Stephenson cites a similar education to that of bell hooks in her blog essay "The Fabrication of the Creole Woman", which documents a series of durational sewing performances in France, Barbados and Haiti from 2008 to 2014. In 2012 Prézeau invited a group of Haitian women artists to perform in the *Circle of Freda* in the southern town of Jacmel in Haiti. Prézeau describes the experience of sewing together as follows: "during the performance, our eyes were cast down but the action of sewing encouraged graceful gestures, such as the elegant position of the back while sitting." This note on posture seems to contrast with the experience of factory workers at the Caracol Industrial Park who are bent over rows of sewing machines, sewing

labels into garments, or stood for six hours at a time without a break.<sup>29</sup> The different ages of the participating artists encouraged intergenerational transmission and the collective of women drew on Vodou goddess Ezili Freda as an archetype of artifice. The silence that fell rhythmically over the room at certain points can be read as a reminder of what Prézeau calls “the unspoken” in a Haitian society marked by slavery, dictatorship and occupation. Prézeau points out that this is particularly true for women who “do not discuss important things.” The rhythm of the needle stands in for that which is unspeakable; a form of communication, it becomes a means of memorializing personal and collective histories. In *Mourning/Deuil*, Prézeau performs with seven Barbadian women, embroidering eleven metres of black tulle with artificial rose petals. This seven hour performance that took place in Barbados in 2010 after the earthquake is described by the artist as a homage to women who have lost their love ones. The performance ends with the women walking together and they finish by wrapping the artist in the tulle veil, as if a protective shroud.<sup>30</sup>

*[Figure 5: Barbara Prézeau, ‘Le Complexe de cendrillon’, performance, Galerie JM’ Arts, Paris, 2008. Photo: Jack Beng Thi]*

The slow expression of Prézeau’s sewing interventions is not altogether static, but prioritizes the process over the final product. It draws attention to the mending and care of textiles as it slowly resists the low-wage assembly line of fast fashion. This restoration of habitus through cloth represents a return to the body as a site of embodied memory, retracing stories of loss following the earthquake. On the ground, clothing and textiles, necessary forms of insulation and protection, are patched together and preserved as bodily architecture in the face of climatic and political vulnerabilities. Cloth is not only a necessary form of insulation and barrier against contagion, it also facilitates “positive contagion” (Fuchs et al. 2015, 101), in other words, an increase in social contact between people. It serves as important social and psychic modes of care for Haitian subjects who are all too familiar with the upcycling of secondhand power relations from elsewhere to benefit foreign interests.

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<sup>29</sup> Here I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer of this article who pointed out this likely distinction. Worker testimonies were gathered in interviews conducted with members of the Sendika Ouvriye Vanyan S&H Global (SOVASHG) garment workers’ union, August 13, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> For video documentation of *Mourning/Deuil* (2010) and *Circle of Freda* (2012) see: <https://www.prezeau-stephenson.com/en/performances-english>



The perception of the earthquake as *tabula rasa*, or what Henry Robert Jolibois has called the “zero hour”, folds Haiti along a before and after hinge.<sup>31</sup> Haitian-Canadian novelist, Dany Laferrière, in his memoir of the earthquake *Tout bouge autour de moi* (*The World is Moving Around Me*), questions the notion of the “Year Zero”: “There are things you can never eliminate from a trajectory, like human sweat. What should be done with the two centuries, and all they contain, that preceded Year Zero? Throw it all in the garbage?” (2013, 82).<sup>32</sup> Despite the promotion of capitalist garment manufacturing as development strategy, Prézeau’s interventions symbolize how local traditions of working with cloth “before zero”, developed over two hundred years of Haitian history, have not been erased, and will continue to emerge and evolve, crafting selves and transmitting intimate cultural knowledge between generations. Textile actions are all the more political - even subversive – in Haiti where cloth has historically been used to cover, mask, mimic, reflect and decorate human life in order to defy enduring colonial and imperial dominance. It seems time to rethink the position of local makers in this context in order to effectively collaborate across global borders of racialised privilege with sensitivity. On the one hand, social entrepreneurship projects proposed by Deux Mains, Local Buttons or the ABN, discussed above, represent a slow erosion of the multinational textile complexes promoted by offshore capitalists, as unlike the deskilled piecework of the EPZs these enterprises train workers in transferable skills. Yet, while many of these models do encourage domestic production, by ignoring existing local entrepreneurship, the specificities and conditions out of which the postcolonial state emerged, “ethical fashion” projects risk constituting short-term development solutions or worse, merely another example of, what some activists have called, “the humanitarian occupation” of Haiti (Schuller 2016, 228).

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<sup>31</sup> Jolibois is the director of l’Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National in Haiti. This is taken from his special presentation, “The Importance of Historical Preservation in a Post-Disaster Recovery Context”, given at the Haitian Studies Association 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Tulane University, New Orleans, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> “Il y a des choses qu’on ne pourra jamais éliminer d’un parcours: la sueur humaine. Que fait-on de ces deux siècles, et de tout ce qu’ils contiennent, qui ont précédé l’année zéro ? Les jette-t-on à la poubelle ?” (2011, 85).

*Nouvelliste*, August 11. <http://lenouvelliste.com/lenouvelliste/article/161941/JL-Fine-Shoes-SA-le-pari-de-relancer-la-cordonnerie-haitienne>.

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#### Figures:

Figure 1: Tailor Jean Jonas Labaze. Photo by Leah Gordon from her *Tailors of Port-au-Prince* series, 2012.

Figure 2: Bundles of pèpè secondhand clothing from the US being transported to a depot in Cap-Haïtien. Photo: Charlotte Hammond

Figure 3: *This is Haiti* window promotion, UK. Photo: Charlotte Hammond

Figure 4: *Deux Mains* shoe production, Port-au-Prince. Photo: Charlotte Hammond

Figure 5: Barbara Prézeau, *Le Complexe de cendrillon*, performance, Galerie JM' Arts, Paris, 2008. Photo: Jack Beng Thi